

Homelessness Not Improving in Oregon



Tents line the sidewalk on SW Clay St in Portland, Ore., on Dec. 9, 2020., (AP Photo/Craig Mitchelldyer)

People with disabilities sue city over blocked walk ways.

(AP) —People with disabilities in Portland, Oregon, have sued the city, saying they can't navigate its sidewalks because of sprawling homeless encampments. The federal class action lawsuit says the city has violated the Americans with Disabilities Act by allowing homeless people's tents to block city sidewalks, making it difficult for people using wheelchairs, walkers or canes to use them.

"The entire class of persons with disabilities are regularly deprived of the benefits of services of the city of Portland," said John DiLorenzo, lead counsel for the plaintiffs. The

plaintiffs include nine people with disabilities and a caretaker. Among the plaintiffs is Keith Martin, a 71-year-old Portland resident who has used a wheelchair since having a stroke three years ago.

"I couldn't get to my breakfast in the morning because there was a tent covering the whole sidewalk," Martin said. "I was forced onto the street and narrowly missed a streetcar that came around the corner."

Oregon's homelessness crisis has been fueled by a housing shortage, the coronavirus pandemic and high drug addiction rates. The class action suit seeks to require the city to clear all sidewalks of tent encampments and debris, and to construct, purchase, or otherwise provide for emergency shelters in which to house the unsheltered persons who may be affected.

Portland Mayor Ted Wheeler's office said the mayor is meeting with the city attorney before providing comment. Plaintiff Steve Jackson, 47, is legally blind and uses a cane to

walk. He said tents prevent him from navigating the sidewalk and accessing bus stops.

"Often there's tents blocking the entire sidewalk, where I don't see them because they weren't there the day before, and I hit the tent and then people are mad at me and think I'm attacking them," Jackson said during a news conference.

The Portland City Council declared a state of emergency on homelessness in 2015 and has extended it five times since then. The measure, now set to expire in 2025, reduces the bureaucratic hurdles surrounding the creation of homeless shelters.

This year alone, Wheeler has issued four emergency declarations to address homelessness issues. Most recently in August, he expanded a previous declaration that prohibits camping along high-speed corridors such as highways to include key walking routes to K-12 schools. Oregon lawmakers earlier this year approved a budget that includes \$400 million to address homelessness and housing.



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